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ABSTRACT

This paper describes Project THREADS (Transformations for Humanistic and Responsive Education for All Deaf Students), a program to develop a model for increasing the multicultural competence of inservice teachers of the deaf. Project THREADS is designed to facilitate changes in individual teachers and changes in their institutions while working to develop best practice multicultural education models. Twenty-two teachers in teams from 10 schools and programs for the deaf are being trained over the course of 3 years. The project provides a 1-week summer institute each year at Gallaudet University (District of Columbia), and a distance education component throughout the school year for academic credit. The 10 sites are geographically representative and include day schools, residential schools, and public school classes. The first summer institute introduced the teachers to theories of multicultural education and implications for deaf education. The second THREADS institute examined constructivist versus traditional curriculum, interdisciplinary thematic teaching, materials evaluation, and identification of resources. Practical application of theory within the classroom is emphasized as is use of the same constructivist methods to train the teachers that the teachers themselves are encouraged to use with their students. (DB) students. (DB)

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Multicultural Education Applications for Teachers of the Deaf: Creating Culturally Responsive Curriculum

by

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The Need for Culturally Responsive Curriculum

Ethnic and racial diversity in schools and programs for the deaf, is rapidly increasing with approximately 40 percent of school-age deaf children from culturally diverse backgrounds (Schildroth & Hotto, 1994). At the same time, only about 10 percent of teachers of the deaf are from racially and/or ethnically diverse backgrounds (Andrews & Jordan, 1993). As of December 1990, the Council on Education of the Deaf (CED), requires teacher preparation programs to include multicultural perspectives (Christensen, 1993). However, teachers already in the field, who may not have had this training, need theoretical information, mentors, models of best practices, instructional strategies, resources, relevant materials, and support systems for meeting the needs of diverse deaf students.

Accomplishing this requires not only individual change, but institutional change. Multicultural education is a movement for educational reform that aims to restructure education for equity. Educational equity means that all students, regardless of their racial/ethnic background, socioeconomic class, ability/disability, religion or gender will have equal opportunities to learn and achieve (Banks & Banks, 1993).

Project THREADS

Project THREADS, Transformations for Humanistic and Responsive Education for All Deaf Students, focuses on developing a model for increasing the multicultural competence of in-service teachers of the deaf to become

leaders for the construction of culturally responsive school environments. Project THREADS is designed to facilitate changes in individual teachers, and changes in their institutions while working to develop best practice multicultural education models that are relevant to the education of the deaf students.

Twenty-two teachers in teams, from 10 schools and programs for the deaf are being trained over the course of three years. The project provides a one week summer institute at Gallaudet, and a distance education component throughout the school year for academic credit. The sites are geographically representative, and include day schools, residential schools, and public school classes for deaf students. The project has an administrator who is a liaison at each site, and an Advisory Board.

During the first Summer Institute, teachers were introduced to the theories of multicultural education, and implications for deaf education. During the school year, teachers conducted needs assessments at their sites. During the second Institute, the topic was multicultural curriculum using constructivist approaches to teaching. During the current school year, teachers are revising and modifying their classroom curriculums and instructional strategies. In Year Three, teachers will begin broader implementation, and dissemination at a school-wide level.

Creating Culturally Responsive Curriculum

What does multicultural curriculum for deaf students include and what does it mean? What educational practices are most compatible with a multicultural perspective? How do pre-service and in-service teachers of the deaf learn to develop culturally responsive curriculum for deaf and hard of hearing students? The second THREADS Institute provided the teachers with a framework for constructivist versus traditional curriculum, interdisciplinary thematic teaching, materials evaluation, and identification of resources.

Curriculum theory which is abstract seems to lack concrete classroom applications if taught in isolation. What understandings of constructivist curriculum are the most helpful to teachers? McNeil provides a contrast between traditional and constructivist approaches to curriculum development. He notes that while traditional approaches emphasize attainable and predictable outcomes, constructivist approaches value unpredictable outcomes. Content is not rigid, predetermined and formulaic, but rather it is based on each learner's "current understanding " as the starting point. Rather than planning specified activities in advance, activities evolve as each learner proceeds (p. 12). When teachers understand this contrast, they are more in control of their classrooms because they can articulate their philosophy. Rather than seeing their teaching style as their idiosyncratic approach, they begin to understand how they fit into a particular model of curriculum.

Wood (1997) characterizes the constructivist approach in a way that may be familiar to many teachers of the deaf: "children ...need to construct their own knowledge, personally, by using their different cognitive strengths, through direct experiences, whenever feasible and through opportunities to interact with adults and peers " and "(m)otivation will be stronger if unit activities and lessons capitalize on the children's interests, working styles, and learning styles (p. 62).

Teacher Applications

The challenge when working with teacher practitioners is building their knowledge base at both the theoretical and practical applications levels simultaneously. Most teachers are seeking applications that can be used immediately in their own settings. This is not meant to imply that teachers always want recipes, but that teachers want materials, ideas, and activities that they can use when designing their classroom curriculum. As teacher educators, we feel the need to provide theory. Teacher practitioners, who face children everyday, want inspiration, resources, and utilitarian approaches.

A goal when developing an understanding of constructivist approaches is the empowerment of teachers to name what they may do already, or to explain why they may feel dissatisfied with traditional curriculum approaches. One teacher when describing things she already was doing said that they had been exploring ethnic communities in the neighboring city that had a large and

varied Asian and Hispanic/Latino population. However, she had not realized that this approach could be labeled as constructivist.

Another teacher, decided to throw out the textbook when teaching her World History class this year. Her chosen theme was "Independence Movements" beginning with Ghandi. Initially, the students were lost without a book, specific worksheets to fill out, and tests with close-ended answers. There were a number of adjustments they had to make, but they loved the new approach. At the beginning of the unit, the students did a Know/Want to Learn/Learned (KWL) exercise to set the parameters for their work. By repeating this at the end, they realized how much they had learned. They made connections with prior knowledge they had been exposed to repeatedly through the years. They discovered that Martin Luther King Jr. used civil disobedience and non-violent protest methods developed by Ghandi. Library and research skills proved to be a weakness of the students, a discovery that might not have been made without using this approach.

Another teacher's preliminary plans included a thematic unit focusing on the right to vote. Students learned about the struggle of women and African Americans, and voting rights in the new South Africa.

Teaching Methods in Teacher Education

In teaching constructivist theory, it would be paradoxical to use traditional teaching methods. Teacher practitioners have little tolerance for such contradictions. As a teacher participant in the early 90s in Whole

Language Literacy training, I sat for several hours a day in an auditorium listening to various experts who told us to use active learning, and student-centered approaches. Many of the teachers in that Literacy Institute vocally noted the inconsistency. Therefore much planning went into making the THREADS Institute a model of participatory active learning.

During their first summer, teacher immersed themselves in the Deaf cultural environment of Gallaudet; the focus the second year was on Washington, DC as the premier African American city rich with Black History. We began the week with two experiences that profoundly affected the teachers. Sunday morning we attended a Black church with a ministry for the Deaf. One teacher described being with people who so openly and jubilantly expressed their faith as taking him out of his comfort zone. Another, who grew up on a farm in Minnesota, commented that if Lutherans had acted this way in church, she would have had a whole lot more fun going to church. We learned more in a little over two hours about the centrality of the church in the African American community than reading numerous books could have conveyed. The sermon addressed racism; the choir was made up entirely of Black men; and the church was full at 7:45 in the morning.

During the afternoon, we were led on a Black History tour of DC by two native Washingtonians to well-known sites such as the Frederick Douglass House (overlooked often because of its location in Anacostia, a troubled section), and less obvious places such as the Arlington National Cemetery. The

idea that a cemetery could be a rich place for Black History was surprising to them.

In teaching teachers using the methods we tell them to use with their students, we can make a profound impact. My co-teacher and I worked to model responsive education. Recalling McNeil, we made adjustments to the schedule (content is not rigid, predetermined and formulaic) adding sessions and reacting to concerns (making new sessions optional and providing alternative activities), and finding unexpected outcomes. A speaker from Puerto Rico spoke in Spanish using trilingual interpreters. Speaking Spanish, without being interrupted by pausing for English translation, the speaker conveyed intense emotions. However, one of the interpreters was incomprehensible to the hearing teachers, and they were frustrated. Initially, they thought that this was an intentional exercise to convey the daily struggles of Deaf people. The discomfort , although not intentional, created an unplanned learning experience.

The challenge of helping teacher practitioners create culturally responsive curriculum for deaf students means taking risks. As teacher educators, we must walk the walk, not just talk the talk. We must be willing to leave our comfort zones, to become models of constructivist practice, and learners along side the practitioners with whom we work.

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